DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 846 CS 503 630

AUTHOR Flynn, Meredith
TITLE Nonassertive Arm Movement Behavior in Women Acting Students.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (Dallas, TX, August 9-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acting; *Assertiveness; Behavioral Science Research; *Communication Research; *Females; Higher Education; Males; *Sex Differences; Sex Stereotypes; *Social Influences; Theater Arts

ABSTRACT

Observing that many of the women in an acting class were having more difficulty than the men with some physical exercises requiring strong use of the arms (labeled nonassertive arm movement behavior), a teacher educator researched the psychological and physiological reasons behind this behavior pattern. The search revealed numerous studies showing that women are far less physically aggressive or assertive than men, and concluding that this is a "sex appropriate" behavior actually taught to children through reward and punishment, rather than an inherent sex trait. Although there was a dearth of relevant research comparing the strength of men and women, the teacher educator found that the differences in strength are greater within either sex than they are between the sexes. The teacher educator concluded that women can substantially increase the strength of their arms through weightlifting, but also that it is vitally important for acting instructors to be aware of women's background of conditioned passiveness and of their experiences and thoughts in order to avoid subscribing to the stereotypical view of women as weak and passive and to offer their female acting students the best instruction possible. (HTH)

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Nonassertive Arm Movement Behavior in Women Acting Students

as presented at the 1981 American Theatre Association Convention in Dallas, Texas

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Meredith Flynn
At the Foot of the Mountain
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Adrienne Rich, renowned poet and feminist theorist, has stated,

> One of the most devastating weaknesses of university learning, of the store of knowledge and opinion that has been handed down through academic training, has been its almost total erasure of women's experience and thought from the curriculum...[1]

Unfortunately, Rich's statement aptly describes the academic training students are receiving in theatre today. I became painfully aware of the "erasure of women's experience" when I participated in an actor training workshop at Bowling Green State University. As a result of this experience, I am convinced it is crucial for acting teachers to become aware of women's background and experience and to bring this knowledge into the classroom.

The central focus of this workshop was on physical training. Many of the exercises required powerful arm movement along with arm strength. At one point, the man who conducted the workshop commented on how few of the women students could execute these particular exercises. Now, whenever anyone makes a comment about how "women" as a class are limited in their ability to do something, I become immediately suspicious and I was not about to let his comment go unchallenged. But as I began to closely observe the exercises, I had to admit he seemed to be right; the women were definitely having problems.

Many of the women in the workshop could not hit or pound a gym mat with any force or power. They generally found the idea of hitting something with their fist disagreeable. When finally encouraged to at least try, the result was more of a gentle tap than a forceful blow. Another exercise required the students to stand, arms at their sides, 3 or 4 feet away from a wall, facing it. They were then instructed to fall forward, breaking the fall at the last instant by extending their arms to the wall. Of course, the longer a student waited before throwing her or his arms up, the more powerful an arm movement was required to break the fall. Many of the women would have their arms up the instant they started falling forward. Leap frog--a classroom favorite--also caused problems. This game had only one variation from the game we remember as children. That is, the "leapees", instead of crouching in a ball on the ground, merely bent over, placing their hands on their knees. This meant that the "leapers" had a considerably taller obstacle over which to propel themselves. But if the "leapers" placed their hands firmly on the back of each "leapee" and used their arms to push up and over, they would have no problems. Once again, the women who had difficulty with the other exercises mentioned, had difficulty with this game. Their arms just did not seem to be powerful enough to propel them over the backs of their classmates.

Oddly enough, few, if any, of the men in the class had difficulty with any of these exercises.

After discussing this phenomenon further with the man conducting the workshop, we decided the problem stemmed from the women's inability to use their arms in an assertive, powerful manner and we labeled this problem "nonassertive arm movement behavior". I was still rather reluctant to admit that the women exhibited this "nonassertive arm movement behavior" and the men did not. I was encouraged to research this area and it was at this point that I became aware of the impact of Adrienne Rich's statement. The more research I did, the more I realized how vitally important it is to consider women's experience, background and thought when training actors. No acting book I have ever read or acting class I have ever attended has said a word about how men's and women's experience is not the same and how this might affect actor training.

When I started researching this "nonassertive arm movement behavior" phenomenon, I was unsure where to begin. I had read an article on Women's Theatre in which Roberta Sklar, an active worker in feminist theatre, had talked about women's relationship to their bodies and how this affected their physical training. Sklar stated,

> ... on the one hand, the theatre today puts a demand on the use of the body in a highly active, flexible way. On the other hand, women are pretty much locked into certain senses of their bodies as being too this, too that--the beauty scale is a crucial

> measuring stick that a woman carries around with her all the time. So, if you ask people to be totally flexible and responsive with their bodies, it seems to me you have to recognize what the psychological baggage is that's holding them down. In teaching a lot of the physically freeing stuff that developed in the late sixties in experimental theatre, I found it important to focus on where women's minds were as they worked with their bodies. Let me be concrete: a woman often thinks of a certain type of physical movement as calisthenics, as exercise for how her body's going to look. And if that's unshakeable, then it's worthless to do those things with women actresses. If the goal is to free the tension in the body and to develop flexibility, but the head is working on a smaller waistline, it's a useless thing to learn to do the headstand, etc...unless you can break through the calisthenic mind set.[2]

This quote led me to think that if I wanted to get at the reason as to <u>why</u> women are unable to move their arms assertively, perhaps I should begin to look at some of this "psychological baggage" they carry around.

Turning to psychological research, I was amazed at what I found. The results of study after study determined that women are far less physically aggressive or assertive than men. In fact, a large number of studies, using different methods over a wide range of ages, report with near unanimity--which is indeed a rarity in psychology--that the male is more physically aggressive then the female.[3] Social-learning theorists have determined that this form of "sex-appropriate" behavior (assertive, aggressive for men; passive, weak for women) is actually taught to children through reward and punishment and through this experience children learn what is socially approved behavior for women and what is approved for men.

Such sex role stereotyping begins early in life when boys are encouraged to be aggressive, competitive, and independent while girls are rewarded for being passive and dependent.[5] Sex differences in physical aggression have been documented for three year olds. Parents make the greatest distinction between the sexes in the area of physical aggression. In an experiment in which children of both sexes were equally rewarded for aggressive behavior, very little difference between the sexes was found.[6] This experiemnt shows how this is a learned and not an inherent mode of behavior for both men and women.

In teaching their children such "sex-appropriate" behavior, parents are merely subscribing to the societal norm. In this culture, the notion of what it means to be female inevitably suggests a submissive role. Strong assertive, powerful women are accepted less readily by both men and women than are weak women.[7] In her book Women and Madness, Phyllis Chesler points out that powerful women are experienced as dangerous and are ostracized.[8]

The degree to which this "norm" for female behavior is accepted in our society becomes rather frightening when we consider how clinically trained psychologists, phychiatrists, and social workers describe the mature healthy male and the mature healthy female. The mature male was described as very aggressive, independent, not at all emotional

very objective, dominant and self-confident. The mature "healthy" female, on the other hand, was described as not at all aggressive, not at all independent, very emotional, very submissive, very sneaky, her feelings easily hurt, not self-confident and very dependent.[9] Keep in mind that this is what the professionals said a healthy woman should be like.

Considering the psychological pressure our society places on women to behave submissively and passively, it is no small wonder that women have difficulty using their arms in an assertive, powerful manner. Women learn to act nonassertively. Cultural conditioning is the culprit, robbing women of the power to use their arms in an assertive manner.

After I read what I needed to know about the psychological issues related to women's nonassertive arm movement behavior, I wanted to look into the physiological issues. Since many of the exercises from the workshop involved arm strength, I was curious to find out about the relationship between women and strength.

In this area of research I had difficulty finding information. Even today, secrecy and ignorance surround the subject of female physiology. Only a fraction of physical education research deals with women's performance or compares men and women under conditions of maximum effort. There are almost no studies on the long range efforts of strenuous

conditioning program on women. There is virtually no information on the physical capabilities of older women. Dr. Clayton Thomas, vice-president of medical affairs for Tampax and one of the few experts on female physiology, in the male dominated medical field, states, "It's almost as if there was a cultural or professional taboo against designing a research study involving women."[10]

I was able to find one study which dealt exclusively with the difference between the arm strength of men and women. This study was conducted in 1976 when West Point opened its hallowed doors to women. The Office of Physical Education, having no idea how to approach the physical training of the new women cadets, decided to use the first group of women as guienea pigs. These women were put through the same routines as the men and the academy carefully followed and evaluated the performance of thirty women cadets compared to that of thirty men. The most pronounced difference between the men and women was in the area of arm strength. The areas of greatest weakness for the women cadets were arm and shoulder strength and grip strength.[11]

The results of this study may be deceiving, however, It has been proven that the differences of strength within either sex are far greater than the differences between them. The male's superiority of strength may be more of an "artifact of social or cultural restriction

imposed on the female...then a result of true biological difference in performance potential between the sexes."[12] Thus the physically inferior are not women, but any human being who does not develop the body's potential--which is exactly what women have been taught to do for centuries of sexist dogma.

But some women are proving such sexist dogma as "women are inherently weak" to be utter nonsense. In the past few years, many women have become seriously involved in weight training programs. These women are quickly dispelling the "weak woman" myth. According to Professor Jack H. Wilmore of the University of Arizona,

> A recent study has demonstrated that the mean strength of young, nonathletic women can be improved by as much as 30 percent by a ten week training program. Some of the women in this study doubled their strength in selected areas during this relatively short training period.[13]

My research into women's psychology and physiology taught me two things: first, women are conditioned from infancy to behave in a submissive, nonassertive, powerless fashion and second, women may be physically weaker then men but they can, through weight training exercises, greatly increase their strength. The first conclusion that I drew from this information was, if a woman was to learn how to use her arms assertively and powerfully, she would need to build her arm strength and thus weight training exercises should be incorporated into acting classes. But in the past few months, I have decided that this

conclusion is far too simplistic.

I still firmly believe every woman, actor and nonactor alike, would greatly benefit from lifting weights. There are many weight training exercises which could very easily be incorporated into any acting class and in my bibliography, I have listed several books on weight trining for any acting teacher who might want to consider adding such exercises to her or his class. But simply dealing with the physiological issues surrounding women's nonassertive arm movement behavior to the neglect of the psychological issues, is like trying to cure the symptom while ignoring the disease.

Even if women do become physically strong, it will do them very little good if they feel they cannot exert that power and strength in the world because the societal pressures saying they "shouldn't" are too great. The "power" issue for women is not just a matter of physical strength. Women as a class have never had access to direct political and economic power. In Women and Madness, Phyllis Chesler points out that physical strength has no relation to political or social strength. She says,

> In America it is often said that poor and Third World women are physically and mentally 'tougher' than middle class white women. However, they have not assumed political leadership within the middle class or liberation-oriented Third World communities.[14]

If the nonassertive arm movement behavior problem is truly to be

tackled, the entire issue of women and power in our society must be considered.

My purpose here is not to grapple with the rather weighty issue of women and power in society. However, I do want to point out how the omission of this issue from acting classes cheats women acting students.

Most acting teachers, like the one I had, will automatically buy into the stereotypic view of women--as a class--as weak, nonassertive, and powerless. They will not go beyond this view to ask why? They will not take a close look at women's experience to find the reasons behind why women as a class are weak in our society. As long as acting teachers reject women's background and experience and accept a stereotypical view, women students will not progress very far in their ability to move in an assertive, powerful manner.

The issue of nonassertive arm movement behavior is only one area of actor training where a knowledge of women's experience is essential. Personally, I believe this is only the tip of the iceburg and that a knowledge of women's experience is vital in all areas of actor training. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that a women's acting method is not only possible but essential, just as feminist theatre groups are beginning to discover.

I would like to end my paper where I began: with a quote from Adrienne Rich.

> In teaching women, we have two choices: to lend our weight to the forces that indoctrinate women to passivity, self-depreciation, and a sense of powerlessness...or to consider what we have to work against, as well as with, in ourselves, in our students, in the content of the curriculum, in the structure of the institution, in the society at large.[15]

Hopefully, more teachers in theatre will begin to embrace this second choice.

Footnotes

[1]Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton and Company, 1979), p. 232.

[2]Charlotte Rea, "Women for Women," *The Drama Review*, 18, No. 4 (December, 1974), p.85.

[3]Judith Bardwick, *Psychology of Women: A Study of Bio-Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 127.

[4]Barbara Deckard, *The Women's Movement: Political, Socioeconomic and Psychological Issues* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 24.

[5]Susan Osborn and G. Harris, *Assertive Training for Women* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1975), pp. 3 - 4.

[6]Deckard, op. cit., p. 25.

[7]Osborn, op. cit., p. 3.

[8]Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 242.

[9]Deckard, op. cit., pp. 13 - 14.

[10]Ann Crittenden, "Closing the Muscle Gap," *Out of the Bleachers*, ed. Stephanie Twin (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1979), p. 8.

[11]Kathryn Lance, *Getting Strong* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), p. 13.

[12]Crittenden, op. cit., pp. 6 - 7.

[13]Dobbins and Sprague, *Gold's Gym Weight Training Book* (New York: Berkley Books, 1978), p. 21.

[14]Chesler, op. cit., p. 293.

[15]Rich, op. cit., p. 240.

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